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**Authors:** Moses, Marilyn  
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## **ENTERPRISING OFFENDERS**

### **Texas' Project Re-Enterprise Unites Business, Corrections Communities**

In July 1985, David Lee Holland robbed the Jefferson Savings and Loan in Beaumont, Texas. With a .45 caliber handgun, Holland also robbed longtime Jefferson employee Helen Henry of her life, and Henry's five-year-old daughter of a mother.

After the murder, Helen's ex-husband, Frank Henry, raised their daughter alone. Nearly a decade after Helen's death, Frank did time at the Kyle unit, Texas' first in-prison drug treatment facility. Frank was not an accessory to his wife's murder, nor was he a drug addict. Instead, he elected to go to prison as part of his job as human resources officer for Fluor Daniel, an international construction engineering company.

Fluor Daniel is one of several hundred companies that participate in Texas' Project Re-Enterprise (PRE), a simple, but novel, approach for bringing the business and corrections communities together to tackle the tough problem of post-release employment of ex-offenders.

An informal education program created and administered by the Crime Prevention Institute (CPI), PRE is not an offender job placement program. But inmates do receive assistance in completing job applications, practicing classroom interviews, and ultimately, attending a mock job fair.

The program succeeds in putting a human face on the criminal justice system. Each business owner or human resource officer who participates in PRE is also a Texas citizen with an opinion about offenders and the criminal justice system. Through face-to-face mock job interviews, they learn that inmates have names, faces, possibly some education and work histories, in addition to their criminal backgrounds. For many of these employers, PRE is their first "behind bars" experience and may alter or solidify previously-held perceptions about criminals and corrections.

"The only reason I went was because my manager asked me to," Henry recalls. "I was none too thrilled about the idea. It would be my first time in a prison. I was not sure how I was going to cope with it, given what had happened to Helen."

"At first I was overwhelmed with emotions too difficult to explain. A change in perspective came over me with each interview. I was impressed with the inmates' openness, frankness and the fact that they seemed so impressed that people from private industry cared about them. I realized that these people were not too different from me. Perhaps they had not had the best guidance growing up and they had definitely made some wrong choices along the way. I left wanting to do what I could to help."

Since Henry's first PRE experience, he has hired 18 ex-offenders. "I have found them to be excellent employees. As far as I know, none has gotten into trouble again. All remain employed with us or have moved on to jobs with competitors."

## **The Job Fair**

Big ideas, though simple in concept, have a way of luring people into the belief that they are easy to carry out. Anyone considering instituting a PRE-like program should realize that it is labor-intensive, and may require much effort to implement and sustain over time.

While at least two jurisdictions have successfully replicated the mock job fair concept using existing correctional staff, at least two factors thwart replication. First, correctional administrators report difficulty in gaining entry to the business community. A second confounding factor is the high, and therefore prohibitive, cost of outsourcing administration of the program. In the alternative, administering the program using existing staff is perceived by some administrators as overly burdensome. This is where CPI comes in.

In a CPI-administered program, the institution's role is limited to selecting participating offenders; making the offenders available to CPI staff for mock job fair training; providing easy access to and egress from the facility for the corporate volunteers and CPI staff; providing a continental breakfast and lunch for the corporate representatives on the day of the mock job fair; and setting up and breaking down the mock job fair area.

Generally, three weeks of intensive preparation is required for each mock job fair. In past years, CPI has held an average of six mock job fairs per year, benefiting more than 1,450 inmates.

## **Preparations**

A number of factors must be considered when preparing for a PRE job fair.

**Employer recruitment.** During the first two years of the program, CPI's chairman, Robb Southerland, "knocked on doors" and did all the recruiting in person. Today, the principal means of recruitment has shifted from a one-on-one approach to telephone solicitation and now is a staff function. Presentations to civic and professional groups, large and small, are made regularly throughout the year.

**Inmate Preparation.** About three weeks prior to a scheduled mock job fair, CPI staff begin working to prepare the offenders for the event. The training process begins with a half-day session devoted to filling out a job application. At the conclusion of the first of three half-day training sessions, inmates complete skills surveys. This inventory will be used later to match inmate skills with employer needs.

**Employer Confirmation.** Confirming employer participation prior to the PRE mock job fair is not a task to be taken for granted. Some employers may cancel and others must be recruited to take their place.

**Scheduling.** In the first few years of operation, considerable time was devoted to scheduling and matching the employer labor need profile to the inmate skill survey. This process has since been computerized, however, and is now accomplished more efficiently.

**Employer Orientation.** The business owner or assigned human resources officer receives no training in advance of the mock job fair. However, employers are encouraged to be honest with inmates and also are cautioned not to raise unrealistic expectations by making such remarks as, "You're really great, I'd hire you in a minute."

The Mock Job Interviews. Each interview session lasts 30 minutes. The first 20 minutes are spent on the actual mock job interview. Employers ask the typical tough questions such as, "Why should we hire you over all the other applicants for this job?" The last 10 minutes of the interview period are spent providing feedback to the applicants on their interview performances.

## **Funding**

The first PRE mock job fair was a "two-man show." Southerland took time from his personal business endeavors to recruit employers. John Bonner, then warden of the Kyle unit -- Texas' first in-prison therapeutic community -- handled institutional logistics. When the business community expressed a desire to continue the program, the Crime Prevention Institute applied to the Texas Board of Criminal Justice for funding. In 1993, the program was awarded a \$450,000, 22-month contract, which was renewed at \$495,000 on Sept. 1, 1995 for an additional two years.

CPI also has been successful in securing funds from private sources to support PRE. To date, the cost per offender is approximately \$475. For most correctional administrators, the contract amount and the cost per inmate are prohibitive. However, at least two correctional agencies --the Georgia Department of Children and Youth Services and the Maryland Division of Correction -- have replicated the mock job fair concept on a limited basis and at nominal expense using existing staff.

## **Employer Response**

When an employer agrees to become a PRE participant, there are no strings attached. Project Re-Enterprise is an informal education program, not a job bank. Employers are not asked to hire offenders on release or to change their personnel policies. However, as a result of the PRE experience, some employers voluntarily change their policies regarding the hiring of ex-offenders. Others do not, and some cannot due to the nature of their businesses.

Red McCombs' career in the automotive business began in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1950. In 1958, he relocated to San Antonio, where he became partner and then owner of Red McCombs' Automotive Company. Today, McCombs' automotive operations are the largest in Texas and rank sixth in the United States. McCombs became an ardent supporter of PRE after reading a newspaper article about the program. "I was so impressed with the simplicity and practicality of the approach. After reading the article, I immediately picked up the telephone, contacted the Crime Prevention Institute, and asked if I could help."

Since his involvement with PRE, McCombs has worked hard to raise the visibility of the program in the business community and encourage his colleagues to become involved. "It's not a hard sell. It is so practical. Look at these people, they are dead in the water without a job. Without a job, the taxpayers can count on supporting them in correctional institutions indefinitely," says McCombs. Beyond promoting further business involvement, McCombs has publicly committed to hiring 10 parolees per year.

Keith Thomas, human resources director for Texas Instruments-Austin, publicly announced that the company had changed its policy against hiring felons as a result of the PRE experience. "The old policy of not hiring anyone convicted of a felony for at least one year after release has now been changed to consider applicants for immediate employment if the felony conviction did not involve violence," he says.

## **Outlook**

Project Re-Enterprise now is in its fifth year, with steady growth in employer participation. CPI has added additional PRE events, coupled the PRE events with day-long community resource fairs, and now offers follow-up seminars to offenders on how to keep a job once employed.

The decision to hire an ex-offender takes place in the privacy of a company's personnel office. Employment of ex-offenders is a taboo subject for many reasons. Often, there is a legitimate fear that if the public knows that a company employs ex-offenders, business might be lost. Others do not discuss it openly because of their desire not to undermine an ex-offender's chance for a fresh start.

Project Re-Enterprise provides an open forum for interested employers without the expectation to hire or change personnel policies. While offering inmates a valuable reaming experience, PRE also provides a visual strength in numbers for employers that traditional ex-offender job placement programs cannot provide.

Many corporate executives involved in PRE have expressed a desire to expand their involvement in the criminal justice system beyond participation in mock job fairs. In September 1996, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) took advantage of the corporate interest cultivated in Texas and sponsored a first-of-its-kind national conference, "It's Our Business: A Corporate Symposium on Investment in Criminal Justice Solutions." Since that time, a number of industry representatives have contacted NIJ seeking assistance in forming various partnerships with correctional institutions across the country.

As PRE picks up force and speed, CPI will continue to play a central role in helping inmates find jobs. "We are not going to turn this problem around 50,000 people at a time. It is going to be one-by-one," says Southerland. "Until we understand this, we are doomed to repeat our past failures over and over again."

### **NIJ, NIC and OCE Collaborate**

The National Institute of Justice, the National Institute of Corrections of the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office of Correctional Education, U.S. Department of Education have joined forces to bring more information to the field on promising programs. This effort will take the form of a series of joint Program Focus publications highlighting life-skills training programs as well as other promising approaches to offender job training and placement. The first in this series of Program Focus publications highlights and provides additional information on Project Re-Enterprise. "Project Re-Enterprise: A Texas Program" (NCJ 161448) can be obtained free from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) at Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000: 1-800-851-3420; e-mail: askncjrs@ncjrs.aspensys.com.

Inmates participate in as many as six mock job interviews as part Project Re-enterprise.

Although employers are not obligated to hire ex-offenders, many of them do, partly in response to their experiences with PRE.

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By Marilyn C. Moses

Marilyn C. Moses is a program analyst with the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. For additional information, contact her at NIJ, 633 Indiana Avenue, NW, Room 805, Washington, DC 20531; (202) 514-6205; E-mail: [moses@ojp.usdoj.gov](mailto:moses@ojp.usdoj.gov).

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